

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview With Franklin Banks, August 19, 1997

Q: Good afternoon. This is Linda Reed Brickers. I am here at the Banks Funeral Home with funeral director, Mr. Franklin Banks. Good afternoon, Mr. Banks.

Banks: Good afternoon, Miss Brickers.

Q: Thank you for letting me come to do this interview and for being willing to become a part of our Oral History Library down at the Scott Krueger Mansion Cultural Center when it is opened. And let me just begin by asking you to please give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Banks: Full name: Franklin Arthur Banks. Date of birth: April 6, 1924. And place of birth: Newark, New Jersey, Newark City Hospital.

Q: Mr. Banks, what is your occupation?

Banks: Mortician.

Q: What kind of work did you do or did you have a primary job before you became a mortician or funeral director?

Banks: I worked as a veteran's consultant in the Veteran's Administration. I was a truck driver for a while. And I am possession of my real estate and insurance broker's license. And I worked at that for a while.

Q: What is your educational background? How far did you go in school?

Banks: B.S. in Science and Vail School of Business graduate.

Q: To whom did you get married, when and where?

Banks: To Mattie Dockery. We got married in New York in 1943 while I was on furlough from the service.

Q: How did you meet Mattie?

Banks: We went to high school together.

Q: How long did you know her before you were married?

Banks: Four to six years.

Q: Four to six years?

Banks: Yeah. Because I was in high school when we met, and I went to college two years before I went to service, and I knew her all during that time.

Q: What kind of work does Mattie do?

Banks: She's a registered nurse.

Q: Do you and she have children?

Banks: Yes. We have two. A boy named Franklin, Jr., and a girl named Celeste Yvonne.

Q: Celeste Yvonne?

Banks: Yvonne, yeah.

Q: How old are your children?

Banks: Forty-three and forty-four.

Q: What kind of work do they do?

Banks: Franklin is in electronics and sound systems, and Celeste is a supervisor at the Water Department in East Orange.

Q: What is your father's name and where was he born?

Banks: Charles Henry Banks. He was born in Waynesboro, Virginia.

Q: Your mother's name and her place of birth.

Banks: Mary Louise Jones. And she was born in Waynesboro, Virginia.

Q: Did you have any brothers and/or sisters?

Banks: I had two brothers and three sisters.

Q: Their names.

Banks: Dorothy, Thelma and Mary are my sisters. Harry is my brother. And I had a brother

that's now deceased. His name was Charles.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

Banks: He was a messenger for the Fidelity Union Bank on Broad Street in Newark.

Q: In Newark?

Banks: In Newark. Yes.

Q: And your mother's occupation?

Banks: Housewife.

Q: Mr. Banks, did you ever change your name because of any organizational affiliations, etc., such as maybe ethnic groups or political groups or --

Banks: No.

Q: -- or for any reason?

Banks: No.

Q: You said that you were born in Newark and your family migrated from Virginia to Newark. Do you know what year they came to Newark?

Banks: No, cause all my brothers and sisters were born here. In fact, they got married in Newark. My father and mother did.

Q: I see. Do you have relatives, did you have relatives who stayed in Virginia and with whom the family continued to correspond after they came to Newark?

Banks: No. I've never known any relatives in Virginia.

Q: What was your first job after you, you said you went into service, how long did you stay in service?

Banks: Three and a half years.

Q: What was your first job when you, after you came from the service back to Newark?

Banks: Veteran's consultant at the VA in Newark.

Q: When you first established your, after you were married, where did you live in Newark?

Banks: On Bergen and Twelfth Avenue, on the corner.

Q: On the corner of Bergen Street and Twelfth Avenue.

Banks: Twelfth Avenue, yeah.

Q: How long did you stay there?

Banks: Oh, I stayed about six years. Then I moved to Belmar, New Jersey.

Q: To Belmar?

Banks: Yes.

Q: How long did you stay in Belmar?

Banks: Two years.

Q: And came back to Newark?

Banks: Then I came back to Newark, yes.

Q: I see. What was the neighborhood like on Twelfth and Bergen where you lived?

Banks: Well, I grew up on Bergen Street, two doors away from the house I moved into after I married. And it was always a mixed population. I had German friends, Italian friends, Jewish friends. I had a lot of black friends. It was a mixed culture.

Q: What was the housing like in the neighborhood?

Banks: Now you're talking about during my childhood or after I got married?

Q: Well, where you lived as you grew up, as a child, what were the neighborhoods like?

Banks: Well everyone were homeowners there, and they all took care of their houses. So the homes were all in good condition.

Q: Were the neighborhoods mixed residentially and commercially?

Banks: Residentially, yeah. Because we had a leather tanning company just a block away. And

we had the city laundry for the hospital in the next block. But all the rest were little candy stores and A&P and drug stores.

Q: What was the condition of the housing like that you lived in as you grew up and after you got married? Was it a boarding house, or apartment house, or single family, or multi-family house?

Banks: The house I was born in was a two-family house. The house I lived in after I got married was a two-family house. In fact, all that neighborhood was two-family and three-family houses. And one apartment house.

Q: Do you remember what your rent was after you were on your own? Do you remember how much rent you paid for your first apartment?

Banks: Well, it was my father's house. [Laughter] It was about twenty-five or thirty dollars a month.

Q: Why, do you remember why your family chose to settle in that neighborhood on Bergen and Twelfth?

Banks: Well, from what I can understand, when I settled there that was the outskirts of Newark. And then they built up all around them. That area, they built it all up while I was a child.

Q: And where did you live next in Newark after you moved from Bergen and Twelfth?

Banks: I moved to Belmar.

Q: Why did you move to Belmar?

Banks: Well, we had a home down there, and I wanted to get away from up here for a while.

Q: What kind of work did you do while you were in Belmar?

Banks: I was at the VA. I commuted each day.

Q: Where did you, where did your family do their shopping when you lived in Newark, those early days you lived in Newark?

Banks: Well, we had an A&P on the corner, on Thirteenth Avenue and Bergen Street. And ninety-nine percent of the food shopping was done at the A&P. At that time they had an A&P about every four or five blocks. And they were the only chain store that I can remember that was in the area.

Q: What about shopping for clothing and household goods, etc.?

Banks: Well, household goods was down West Market Street. There was an F&W Woolworth, a Bamberger's and Hanes and all those type of stores. What they call downtown Newark. That's where we did our shopping.

Q: How were African-American people treated in those stores downtown? Could you shop freely? I mean, were you just another customer or were there differences in the way African-Americans were received as opposed to whites?

Banks: Well, they were cautious when Afro-Americans came into the stores. And all the clerks looked like someone had alerted to be on the lookout. And they watched every move you made. And they weren't too courteous because they had no black salespersons at that time.

Q: Did they have blacks in other capacities other than sales?

Banks: They were mostly in cleaning, and handling the products. Stocking shelves and stocking the floors with different things that they needed. But they never were in sales.

Q: What about the A&P, the supermarkets and other stores that were in your neighborhood? Did they hire blacks?

Banks: No, they didn't have any blacks.

Q: How did they treat their black customers?

Banks: Well, they treated us very well. They were very sociable and a lot of the blacks had accounts with them. And they allowed them to have these accounts and to pay on them. They knew when the payday was, and they expected to be paid then.

Q: That was going to be my next question. Did the neighborhood merchants give credit to the--

Banks: Oh yes.

Q: --to the African-American people?

Banks: Yeah. Well, A&P never gave credit. That was a chain store. But there was other little Mom and Pop stores that would give you credit. Like the butcher and the baker. They would give you credit. But the A&P never gave you credit.

Q: Did you lead or know anyone who had come from down south to Newark to live?

Banks: Many, many people. Yes.

Q: Does anyone come to mind readily that you might have had good relationships with, and did they talk about their lives down south and compare them with what, with life here in Newark?

Banks: Yeah. I had a friend of mine that we were, went to work in a high school together. He is from the south. In fact, there's about three or four fellows that came from the south that I was quite friendly with. And they talked about the difference from down there and up here. Because they had heard up here there wasn't any segregation, but when they got here, they found out that that wasn't true. [Laughter] So we couldn't go into the, some of the theaters downtown, you know. If we went into them, we had to sit in the balcony. There was no restaurant or eatery place except for Woolworth's and another store down there we could go, we went to. But even there we were segregated.

Q: When the fellows came from the south and their families settled here in Newark, did you notice any difference in the way they dressed when they came from down south as opposed to how you guys dressed here in Newark?

Banks: Well, yeah, we call them country boys.

Q: Why?

Banks: They weren't up to our style. Their style was different. And you could just about pick out those who had recently come from the south from the clothes that they were wearing. We were wearing zoot suits and pegged pants, and they were still in their farmer clothes.

Q: What about eating habits? I'm sure that, as young people do when you form friendships, you go to one another's houses and you eat. I can remember that the people were more friendly. You

could, almost anywhere you went, you were fed. But.

Banks: Yeah. That's the way it was in our neighborhood. We could go to any of the houses in the neighborhood, and if we were there at suppertime or at lunchtime or when they decided to eat, you were always invited to eat. The big thing was the family at that time. I don't think I know of any single parent family that was in our neighborhood. It was all husband and wife and children. And when they ate, they all ate together, and if you was at the house, sometimes you had to run home and ask you mama if you could eat with them, but they were willing to feed you.

Q: The foods that they served at their house was it different from the food that was served at your house?

Banks: Well, the Italians has their dishes; the Jewish had their dishes. Different nationalities would sometimes, you know, would go beyond the American way and serve some of their nationality style cooking.

Q: Particularly, the blacks that you visited who had come from down south is what I'm primarily interested in.

Banks: All blacks had home cooking, had down home cooking. Even if they wasn't from the south, they learned how to do it. And they had what they call soul food now.

Q: Right.

Banks: And they had the same thing then. We had beans and ham hocks, and they would go the butcher and get soup bones for the dog and come home and make soup for the family. [Laughter] Gizzards and chittlins and stuff like that. The butcher threw em away. But if had black customers and they were friendly towards the butcher, he'd give it to them. Because the whites didn't eat that

kind of stuff.

Q: I see. Did you call people, were there any such thing as extended families and what we refer to as victive fam, people who were not related to you but you called them aunt and uncle anyway, or cousin?

Banks: Oh yes. Especially good friends of the father and mother. We'd call them aunt and uncle. Even though they weren't our aunt and uncle.

Q: Did they take the responsibility or to discipline each other's children?

Banks: Yup. I had my behind beat by more strangers than I have by my family. [Laughter] But I was an innocent child. I don't know how I got.

Q: You probably needed it.

Banks: I don't why they beat me, but they, I was always innocent. I had that guilty look.

Q: Yeah, you probably did some things. Knowing you since I've known you, you probably --

Banks: No. Listen they used to call me St. Franklin.

Q: Oh really. [Laughter] Oh really. I can't ask you about the celebration of holidays, etc., down south because you have no grounds for comparison.

Banks: But Thanksgiving and Christmas I guess are the same all over.

Q: How did you family celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas?

Banks: Well, usually everybody got together at home. And we would have our dinner together as a family. And maybe after that we'd go out and go to our friends house and eat again. Cause we was always in and out of each other's homes, the fellows and the girls. But we always, everything was family style when I was a child.

Q: What about the use of intoxicants and other substances as you grew up. Did you, did you know of anyone who used those kinds of things excessively? Or did you have family members who might have gotten, you know, into drugs and alcohol and etc.?

Banks: I guess every family's got somebody. None of my immediate family drank at all or was on dope or anything like that. But I've had a couple of cousins who was questionable. Wasn't too sure about them. But as a rule, alcohol, tobacco, and anything else that was considered illegal was not allowed in my home.

Q: What about the use of, what about medical practices as you grew up? Many people to whom I have spoken or people whom I've interviewed, when you ask about medical practices, they talk about home remedies that their parents or, you know, families used when kids had colds or whatever kind of illnesses that we might have had. How did your family handle those kinds of things?

Banks: Well, I had an aunt who knew all those old home remedies for sicknesses and burns, if you got burned, and everything like that. And we kind of looked towards her if somebody had some problems that my mother couldn't handle, she would take care of it. And I didn't know too much about doctors then.

Q: Do you remember any of the home remedies that they used or whatever?

Banks: I remember the aciphidity[?] bag being stuck so bad I didn't know whether drink at me or

all people. [Laughter] And there was a paste that my aunt used to make, and it had tar in it and kerosene and alcohol and a number of things. But it would heal that you had Any open wound that you had it would heal. I still think she had some taken cause she'd be looking and staring and the moment, like it was black magic or something.

Q: Yeah, that was the next question. Did you know anybody who did believe in vexing or people who believe in the practice of such things as conjure and voodoo and whodo and roots.

Banks: Yeah, I knew quite a few people. Older people. Not the group that I grew up with. That comes from my father and mother's training. You know, they had some that believed in that kind of thing. Not so much as voodooism, but in the medical way, you know.

Q: Right. Right. I understand.

Banks: Something's bothering you, they know how to take care of it.

Q: How were pets regarded in your home, in your neighborhood? Did you have pets as you grew up?

Banks: Oh yeah. Always a dog. And just about everybody up and down the street had dogs.

Q: How did the incidents of crime, what was the incidents of crime like then as compared to now?

Banks: Well, crime was kind of pocketed. And it was pocketed in certain groups. Like where all the blacks live around Prince Street and Belmont Avenue and Spruce Street. Crime seemed to be centered around there for the black people.

Q: What kind of criminal things did they, you know, what kind of crime did they get involved in?

It was not like, like a uzzis and.

Banks: No. No. No. No. [Laughter]

Q: Drive by shootings, all that kind of stuff.

Banks: No. I those days if you had something against somebody, you fought em, in a fist fight. And once in a while, you'd catch a guy with a knife who might try to kill somebody. But usually it was fist fights, and the only weapon would be a pocket knife.

Q: Were those primarily adults or were there juveniles who also got involved in --

Banks: Young adults. Of course in schools they had incidents once in a while. But nothing like.

Q: What was your perception of blacks helping each as you grew up? I mean, in the neighborhoods where you grew, you said that the neighborhood was mixed. There were like other ethnic groups aside from just African-Americans. How did they all relate? Did families help out each other or could they depend on each other if something was missing or they needed something or there was some kind of problems?

Banks: Oh yeah, during the Depression days especially, if they knew you didn't have something to eat, the mothers would get together and fix you something. Some food for you and your family. If they knew you needed help, if somebody got sick and couldn't cook, they would cook for that person. I mean, they stuck together. And it all emanated around the church and around the neighborhood. Because at the church at that time was the center of society for the colored people. And when they said missionary work, they meant missionary work. They'd come and ask you how you feel. And if you didn't feel good, they'd help you out whatever way they could. Most of the people in the neighborhood where I lived was like that.

Q: What were overall relationships between whites and blacks like in the?

Banks: Well, they had their run-ins. But if you stayed in your section and they stayed in their section, you didn't have no problem. It's when they came over in our section or we went over to their section, that there'd be problems.

Q: Do you know of any major customs and traditions that blacks brought from the south to Newark such as picnic and cookouts and barbecues and that kind of thing? Did they do it, you know, have those kind of outings in your neighborhood?

Banks: Yeah.

Q: Do you think those things emanated from the south or?

Banks: Oh yeah. Because south was very family oriented. And also very racially oriented. Because they had to work and stick together because the whites were so much against them. And did it so open that they had to depend on each other. And some of that came right up north with them. Like down at the church now, that was family oriented. If they could help you in any way, they would help. Or if you could help them, you'd go there and help them. And if you'd mess up, anybody at the church could beat the daylights out of you. [Laughter] And you better not go home and tell ma and pa cause then you'd get a second helping.

Q: And it didn't help much, did it, Frank?

Banks: Oh yeah. I told you they call me St. Franklin.

Q: What would have been your first job in Newark after you had graduated from high school, before you went off to college and went off to the service, what was your very first paying job.

Banks: I drove a truck for a vending company that supplied linens and sheets and pillowcases and stuff like that to hospitals. The name of it was Fisher/Cohen. And I drove a truck delivering those things.

Q: How did you get the job?

Banks: They had a youth services in the Hall of Records on High Street. And all of us went down there to get jobs. That's how we got it.

Q: How long did you have this job?

Banks: Until I went to service. So it must have been about three years after I graduated high school.

Q: Did you like the job?

Banks: Yeah, because I was driving, and at that time, not many of the young people had licenses to drive.

Q: How well did it pay?

Banks: Let's see at that time it was pretty good pay. I don't remember what it was now, but I remember that the, I got a big kick out of saying that I could pay my way by paying the rent at home and buying things for the house.

Q: How far was the job from where you lived?

Banks: About fifteen, twenty blocks. I lived on Bergen and the warehouse was on High Street.

Q: How did you get to work?

Banks: Walked.

Q: What were the working conditions like, and how long would your work be?

Banks: Let's see I was in school nights and I worked days. It was five day a week job. Once in a while we'd have to work on a Saturday if there was a special order or something had to be delivered. But ordinarily, it was five days, 8 hour week, 8 hour day.

Q: In what capacities did they hire other blacks besides driving the truck?

Banks: I was the only black in a truck.

Q: I see. How were you treated by your supervisor?

Banks: Oh, he liked me. There was another truck driver there that didn't like me. Those in the office and the supervisor liked me.

Q: Could you tell, could you see any difference in the way they treated you as opposed to how they treated other employees?

END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

Q: I believe my last question, Mr. Banks, was was there any difference in the way that you were treated by your supervisor as opposed to the whites that worked on the job?

Banks: No. Wasn't any difference. After they got over the shock, they treated me very nicely.

Q: What do you mean when you say after they got over the shock? How did they treat you before they got over the shock?

Banks: Well, see, evidently they had put their name in at the youth center for somebody to drive a truck. And I don't think they were expecting a black guy to come and drive a truck. I think they was looking, you know, expecting a white guy. And when I first went in there, they wanted to know what I was there because they had no other blacks working there. And so I told them the youth service had sent me there. And they said, they sent you? So I said, yeah. And he said, wait a minute, and went in the back and made a phone call. I think to check to see if they did send me. So he said, you can drive a truck. I said, yeah. Well, it was a small panel truck. It wasn't a big truck. Said, yeah, I can drive. When can you start? And I said now. He said, okay, we'll try you out. And first I think it was a novelty for some of them that I was there, and than after a while they just accepted me right on in the circle. All except this other truck driver there.

Q: How old were you at that time?

Banks: Seventeen.

Q: Was there a union at that job?

Banks: No.

Q: Was what your next job after the truck driving job?

Banks: It was the army.

Q: Did you ever do any part-time work or casual work?

Banks: Yeah, I used to wax floors part-time. I worked in a garment factory making army uniforms part-time.

Q: How long did you do that kind of work?

Banks: Until I got the job at the VA. After I came out of service.

Q: What specifically was your job at the VA?

Banks: Counseling the veterans on the different phases of the GI Bill. What they're entitled to, how to apply for housing, and how to apply for schooling. Just advising on the benefits that had according to their time of service.

Q: Were you ever unemployed, Mr. Banks?

Banks: No.

Q: What were the common occupations for black men and women in Newark as you grew up?

Banks: As I grew up? Maids, butlers, warehouse workers, dock workers, menial work in the stores and department stores and little grocery shops. You had menial jobs there. The big time workers at my time was the Bamberger boys. He was an elevator operator at Bamberger's. Somebody had told you that he was a Bamberger boy, you'd look up to him. Because they only had tall, light-skinned men that worked there as the elevator operators. And that was the highest rank they had, this was in Bamberger's. That was the highest rank they could attain in Bamberger's.

Q: But how many, how many elevator operators could they employ?

Banks: They had about twelve elevators, and they worked shifts. Four hours on and four hours off.

Q: When did employment opportunities for African-Americans begin to change, and what kind of work did they go into after the menial jobs that they did during those, your early years?

Banks: Well, actually it didn't change until after the War was over. World War II. Except those who were not called into service. They had good jobs in defense factories. If they were ineligible for service, they had, when I say good jobs, I mean good paying jobs. As welders, assemblyman, like that. And, Ford, if you worked for like Ford Motor Company or General Motors Company, you were considered a high tone niche.

Q: When did blacks begin to go into the professions or into politics, earn their living, you know, in the political arena and become professionals like teachers and doctors and lawyers, etc.?

Banks: Well, that came after the War again when they could take advantage of the GI Bill. The GI Bill would pay for their schooling. And a lot of people who had the potential to be lawyers and doctors were able to go to school. We had doctors and lawyers before the War, but it was difficult for them to get into white schools. But after the war, things kind of broke down a little.

Q: What do you mean they broke down a little after the War?

Banks: Well, I mean they had better opportunities.

Q: I see.

Banks: Better opportunities for schooling, to go to school, because the GI Bill helped pay their way. And they opened the doors of some of these white institutions that had not allowed them in

there before.

Q: What church do you belong to, Mr. Banks?

Banks: Bethany Baptist Church.

Q: How long have you been a member of Bethany?

Banks: Since 1936.

Q: How active has your church experiences been or your religious life, how active has it been?

Banks: Well, I've always been active in something at the church. Started off as the Sunday School librarian. That meant to hand the books out.

Q: How old were you when you started doing that?

Banks: I put the chairs around for the different classes. We had little classes, you put your chairs around, and put a book on each chair. A Sunday School book on each chair. Harvey Slayton and I.

Q: Were you a teenager when you started doing that?

Banks: No. This was, I was a, I guess about ten or eleven years old when I started doing that.

Q: I see. What, as you grew up in the church, what kinds of roles did you grow into? What, you know?

Banks: Well, I was on the junior usher roll, in the junior choir and in the youth council.

Q: And as you grew older, what has your?

Banks: Well, I went from a junior usher to the main usher. I was president of the BYPU.

Q: BYPU. The Baptist Youth.

Banks: The Baptist Young Peoples Union. And then it changed the name to BTU, Baptist Training Union. I was in the choir. Started to put me on different committees, church committees. And it's been one thing after another. And I served on, this is the second building committee I've served on. The first building committee was when they built the new church there now. And this committee building a school.

Q: Did you serve on any of the official boards in the church?

Banks: Yeah. I was made a deacon in 1960. And I served of chairman of the board for twenty years. And still on the board.

Q: They haven't kicked you off yet? [Laughter] What do you know about the history of Bethany?

Banks: I know they started in 1871, and it started.

Q: In 18 and 71.

Banks: 1871, yeah. And I knew one of the founders of the church. When I was a child, his grandson and I used to be buddies. And we started off with, I think, there was seven people. And

they started off in a house on Broad Street. And then after a while, they moved to Petty Memorial. They let them use their balcony. And they were shouting and singing, making so much noise that Petty Memorial put them out. So they went to Soapfat Hall that was a. In fact, Petty Memorial financed them to go to the Soapfat Hall.

Q: Soapfat Hall.

Banks: Soapfat Hall. I don't where it go the name, but's that the name. Soapfat Hall.

Q: Where was it located?

Banks: On Market Street. Oh no, it used to be Bank Street then. You know where, well, you know where Bank Street is.

Q: Yes.

Banks: Yeah. And this is just above High Street.

Q: Who was the, you said you knew one of the founders of Bethany. Who was that Franklin?

Banks: Let's see. His name was Tease. And Andrew Tease, his grandson, was the one that grew up with my brother and I. But that was the only founder that I knew or remember.

Q: Who are or were some of the outstanding ministers or members of Bethany that you recall?

Banks: There were a lot of them, you know, that really, they impressed me but they didn't become very famous. But, like Reverend L. C. Hurdle, Reverend Ricks, Reverend Hayes. There was another minister named Josh. And for deacons, Deacon Francis, Deacon Saunders. There were

so many of them. Blackwell.

Q: Were all of the ministers that you've named, were they pastors of Bethany?

Banks: Yeah.

Q: What do you consider to be Bethany's major accomplishments?

Banks: Well, I'll tell you. It made the transition from a neighborhood church to a church that, to where they have expand their horizons from just a neighborhood to internationally. They have grown. When I was a kid, the biggest concern in the church was keeping the church going. And they had clubs like the Fuel Club and the Pulpit Committee and Flower Club and Missionaries, and all their concern at their time was keeping the church going. And that was the center of everybody's social life that attended there. Socially that's where we had our lawn parties and little affairs. You weren't allowed to dance down there, but we had good times in there. And now they've grown to where it's more like an international church, and they're able to get their message out internationally.

Q: What specifically do they do that makes them an international church? What are their associations or their affiliations?

Banks: Well, we support a school, two schools in Africa. We built one school in Africa. And you've heard of Ugama. We assisted in the building of that school. We got a church named after us. It's in South America. We have contacts with them. We have sent students from Africa to school. And through the Lockcarry we've done a lot of missionary work.

Q: What is Lockcarry?

Banks: Lockcarry is the black missionary convention of the Baptist Church. You know, like the American Baptists. Well Lockcarry is similar to that. But their mission is all missionary work.

Q: How much have you participated in social and cultural activities in Newark?

Banks: Well, I used to belong to the Y. And to the museum. New Jersey Symphony.

Q: What about such organizations as the or clubs if you will as the Elks or the Masons?

Banks: Well, I was a Mason. And life member of the NAACP and life member of the DAV.

Q: Of the what, DAV?

Banks: Yes, Disabled American Veterans.

Q: What about literary societies or choral ensembles? Did you ever belong to any singing groups besides from the church choirs?

Banks: No.

Q: Any benevolent associations?

Banks: No.

Q: What positions did you hold in the Masons and other such organizations as you might have belonged to?

Banks: I was second degree Mason. One time I was vice commander of the American Legion

Post 152. I was assistant commander of Chapter 75 of the DAV.

Q: Do you know any of the history of the Masons and the DAV or the Owl Club at all?

Banks: The Owl Club. [Laughter]

Q: I thought I heard you say you were a member of the Owl Club.

Banks: Owl Club, no. That's a nightclub or used to be a nightclub over on Clinton Avenue.

What other club. You're thinking about the Elks?

Q: Yes. I guess so. The Elks and the Masons or, yeah. Do you remember, I was asking do you know anything about the history of the Masons? What makes the Masons the Masons?

Banks: Well, historically they started, was started by Prince Hall in England. He was a black fellow. And he started the Masonry at that time. That goes back to 19, no 1876. Something like that. He started the Masons. The DAV started after the Second World War. It's mixed. Usually you find a chapter, and the chapter is usually all white or all black. The one that we started here was named after one of the fellows that used to go to our church. His name was Frank Ruckner. And the other fellow's name, the post is Ruckner Lee Chapter 75. Lee was a member of the Union Baptist Church in East Orange. And the churchman was the one that helped was a charter member of that, Churchman, Sr. And he helped start that.

Q: Do you remember any member of the Masons or DAV that you might consider as having been outstanding? If so, why would you consider them such?

Banks: Well, most of the politicians and outstanding people of our community are Masons. There may not be an AM and FM, there might be F and AM. But they're Masons. And but as far for

somebody outstanding, offhand I can't think of one.

Q: As far as the leadership in the organizations was concerned, what was their quality of leadership like or?

Banks: Well, when I first started out after the War, there was a very close knit group. Each group was close knit with the members of the group. But as time went on and the olders got a little too old to carry on like they used to, they lost their mystique and their lost their togetherness. Cause the younger fellows like the Vietnam Veterans, don't, they have different ideas than what we had when we started it all. In fact, they're having membership problems now. It's hard for them to get members.

Q: How much have you participated in political activities?

Banks: Not too much. I've had political appointments, but I've never sought to run for an office. I've been Commissioner of Water, Chairman of the Water Commission in East Orange. And Chairman of the, it was a community group that handled the juvenile delinquent cases. And I was chairman of that for a while. Then I was chairman of the Police Community Program that they had in East Orange for a while.

Q: Did you, do you or did you ever belong to any political organizations or political parties or protest groups?

Banks: No.

Q: Are you now a member of either the Democratic or the Republican political parties?

Banks: I'm not a member. I consider myself a Democrat. But I don't join and go to meetings or

anything like that.

Q: How much have you participated in community activities? In what community organizations, for instance, like neighborhood groups or block associations or civic organizations do you or did you belong to?

Banks: Well, the ones that I named before were civic organizations. You know, the Juvenile Conference Committee, the Police something. What did they call that the Police Community Relations Committee?

Q: I don't.

Banks: Yeah. Police Communications. Couple others I belong to I don't remember now.

Q: When did you join those organizations and how long did you participate with them?

Banks: Well, I guess I worked with them for at least ten, fifteen years. At one time or another one of these organizations.

Q: Aside from being a consumer of regular goods and services, in what ways have you participated in the economic life of the community?

Banks: Pay my taxes. [Laughter]

Q: Did you ever own or operate your own business?

Banks: Yeah.

Q: Would you care to tell me about that?

Banks: Well, I've been in the, I've had a funeral home now for forty-two years. Want to buy a funeral home?

Q: You've been in the funeral business for forty-two years?

Banks: Forty-two years that's all. And I guess it's time for me to retire.

Q: Over that period of forty-two years, Mr. Banks, how successful would you say your business has been? Would you consider it have grown in terms of its size or its outreach to the community, or how has your business changed over that forty-two years?

Banks: Well, I had a thriving business for most of those forty-two years. It was hard getting started, but after I got started it provided for all my needs.

Q: When you say it was hard getting started, in what ways was it difficult?

Banks: Well, I had no one to pave the way for me. Like most of the funeral homes their fathers were in the business. And they just took over their father's business. But I started by myself and I had nobody. Three years in the field I had to make it on my own so to speak. So it was a little tough going at the beginning. But then I got a contract with the Veteran's Administration which helped me out quite a bit when I was getting started.

Q: Is the business still functioning?

Banks: Yes it is.

Q: What do you think now is the significance of the business and how does it relate to the community?

Banks: Well, I'll tell you. I consider myself semi-retired. And so at my age now I'm not as active in the community as I used to be.

Q: Understood. Did you ever purchase stock in any black owned businesses or enterprises?

Banks: No.

Q: Mr. Banks, as you grew up, how did the black community get information on the news and events of the black community? Did they read black newspapers?

Banks: Well, we had a couple of good black newspapers. I think it's called the New Jersey Herald, the Afro-American, Pittsburgh Courier. We had quite a few black newspapers at one time. And the WHBI was a source of news for the local area here. Radio station WHBI was a source of news. It wasn't black owned, but it was black run. WHBI. It was owned by Bushberg Brothers. You've heard of them.

Q: Yes. The grant people downtown.

Banks: They owned it. That's why I stuck WHBI. Then those were the two things that we got our news from. Local newspapers and the radio station.

Q: What was the relationship between African-Americans who lived in Newark and those who lived in other communities in other towns or cities around?

Banks: Well, I think it was due mostly to the competition by way of the high school that like the

blacks in Newark have problems with the blacks in Montclair. And the blacks in Orange. Each little city had their affair going, and it was more or less trying to outdo the other city. And I think it came about through the sports activity in the high school --

Q: I see.

Banks: Because the high schools used to play each other. And each one of them wants their bragging rights. So. It wasn't actually a problem. Sometimes there'd be a little outburst. But most of the time it was just a competition.

Q: Well, did you ever meet or hear of any outstanding blacks who came to Newark over the years?

Banks: Came to Newark?

Q: Yeah, who like ministers or speakers or politicians or entertainers. Those kinds of folk.

Banks: Well, Booker T. Washington came to Bethany.

Q: Oh.

Banks: He spoke at Bethany. And what's his name, Amos, not Famous Amos, but other Amos. John Amos.

Q: John Amos.

Banks: He used to live up here on Halstead Street. Some of the minister from New York, like Powell and, used to come over here quite often, when Reverend Hayes was here cause they were

buddy, buddy. Adam Clayton Powell. Senior. And Flakes, you know, the one that just gave up his job at Sunnycamp. Been over here a couple times.

Q: I remember when Al Sharpton came.

Banks: Sharpton.

Q: And Al Poussant.

Banks: That's right. Leroy Kelly or America Rossa. But we've had quite a number of. I know we had Sarah Vaughn, Mt. Zion.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

Q: Mr. Banks, we were talking about prominent people who might have come to Newark during the years that you have lived here. What about entertainers? Sarah Vaughn grew up here, was born here and so was Sissey and Whitney Houston, but were there other entertainers like some of the big band guys like Duke Ellington and politicians such as Jesse Jackson? I remember when Jesse Jackson came here once.

Banks: Yeah, he came here once. Duke Ellington put on a show for Bethany one time, by the Women's League of Bethany, down at the mosque. You should have given me a little more time to think of these questions. [Laughter] If you'd given me a script, then I would have some answers for you.

Q: Oh well, you're doing okay.

Banks: Let me see, who's that other girl singer that's so popular? She grew up here in East

Orange.

Q: Not Ella Fitzgerald.

Banks: No. Her father and I were the Boy Scout Commissioners years ago.

Q: Dionne Warwick?

Banks: Dionne Warwick, yes.

Q: Okay. Do you remember when African-Americans were first hired on the Newark Police force or the fire department or became social workers in this city?

Banks: The first fireman came from Bethany. His name was Leon Thomas. The first fireman in Newark. In fact, we went down there and protested because his appointment came up while he was in service, and they were going to bypass him. And we went down there City Council one night in Newark, a group of Bethanyites, demanding to know why they wouldn't appoint him and he'd have the job when he came out of service. So he got the job. He was the first black fireman. Then the first black policeman was Abssolon Brent, who was a, his father was a deacon at Bethany. And he was the first black to become an officer, a lieutenant, in the Newark Police Department.

Q: Was he the first black person hired? The first black person to become a policeman?

Banks: No. He was about the second or the third. But he was, you know, this other fellow's name. Anyway, they used to work as a team and they --

Q: Was it Prosper Brewer?

Banks: No. I can't. I can't think of his name. And then Carter Saunders, he was one of the members of Bethany, he was one of the first appointed policemen, black policemen.

Q: What about social workers? And do remember how Newark perhaps got to where it is now in terms of people who depend on public assistance for living? Welfare, if you will. Most of the persons who work as social workers who service those persons, were they white or do you remember when blacks became social workers?

Banks: Well, my sister is one of the first black social workers. Thelma Robinson. What were they called then? They weren't called.

Q: Case workers?

Banks: Case workers, yeah. Her and – I can picture her, but I can't think of her name. They were the first, one of the first two case workers. Eubanks, Eubanks. Her name was Eubanks. Her and my sister were one of the first two hired down there. But it really grew after the War was over and after the, see a lot of people migrated from the south during the war because they had a lot of factories and things around here that were doing a lot of war work. And after the war was over, they laid off all those people. That's when the welfare started growing. Because they had all these people more or less stranded here from the south. And they didn't want to go back, and they couldn't find jobs. So they ended up on welfare.

Q: When people in the African-American community got in trouble or needed help to solve a problem, to whom did they go?

Banks: About the only two places was the Urban League and NAACP. They were the only two groups that the black people could depend on.

Q: How effective were they in helping the persons to solve their problems?

Banks: They did the best they could under the circumstances. But, you know, at that time the whites would turn you off when they wanted to. But people like Irving Turner, who was a member of the NAACP, in fact, he was the first black councilman in Newark, he got the people together and had himself voted in as a councilman to show that we had some clout. And afterwards, people stuck together and showed they had some clout. And then gradually opportunities start coming around. There were a few rallies by the Urban League and a few rallies by the NAACP that made them sit up and take notice.

Q: How was black Newark perceived? Was the black community considered to be a slum? The areas where black folk, primarily black folk lived, were they considered to be slums as opposed to other areas in the City of Newark?

Banks: Yeah. Always considered where the blacks lived as a slum area.

Q: Did all classes of African-Americans live close to you? When I say all classes of African-Americans, I mean such professional people as there might have been. Such as the doctors, the lawyers, or the school teachers or.

Banks: Oh, you'd be surprised. Even though that ward was considered the slums, most of our professional people lived over there. And they had decent homes, nice homes. A lot of them lived in the apartments over there. But just the name, just the fact that they were in that area, they was considered as living in the slums. Cause like Harry Hazelwood, the judge. And we had about five or six judges that lived over there in that area. Some of them lawyers. A lot of our doctors, like Dr. Hill, or Dr. Phillips, he's always been down here on West Market Street. And that wasn't considered in the slums, you know. In fact, he was the only black in that area when he was living on West Market Street. You know where the curve is where they built that little mall? As you go

around Bethany and go down the hill.

Q: Twelfth Avenue, yeah.

Banks: It's like a little mall there. That's Twelfth Avenue?

Q: Yes.

Banks: Well, his office is still there. It's the first house next to that mall.

Q: Oh really? How did all those folk get along together in the neighborhood? Did they just kind of leave each other alone? Or did they, was everybody equally interested in the neighborhood or in the quality of life in the neighborhood?

Banks: As a rule, they were interested in the neighborhood. Because they brought a lot of that feeling that they had down south here with them. The feeling of togetherness that they had down south and brought it here with them. But they found that they had a little problem rubbing noses with the ones who were already here or those who were born here. They made themselves into two societies so to speak, the southerners and the northerners. But as a whole, they got along very well. Especially those who attended church.

Q: Other than white store owners and other whites with a vested economic interest, do you recall any other whites having an interest in the black community?

Banks: Well, Ballantine had an interest. Used to be Ballantine Brewery. They did a lot of community work in the black neighborhood. The apartments on Barclay Street and Somerset Street, used to call the Harrison-Douglas apartment, I think they've changed their name now, Metropolitan Life built those buildings. That was their contribution.

Q: But they built those buildings because they had economic interest. They didn't put those buildings up there and say cmon in. They built them because they would generate --

Banks: Business.

Q: --wealth for them. So other than that, when I say.

Banks: Well, when you say business. At the time they built that, they didn't accept black policy holders over a thousand dollars. Black could only get up to a thousand dollars. And they'd get these weekly payments, fifty-two cent a week, for four hundred dollars. By the time they died, they paid in five thousand. But at the time they built those, they weren't even writing black people insurance policies. But they built it.

Q: I think what I'm getting at though is aside from persons such as those who built the Prudential built --

Banks: Oh Prudential, that's right, not Metropolitan.

Q: -- those houses down there and store owners who operated businesses in the black community, were there any other white folk who were interested in the quality of life in the black community.

Banks: No. Not even your politicians. Except when they have election time. Got to be the only time you see them in that area.

Q: I think I asked you a little earlier about shopping in downtown Newark, and you suggested that the white merchants or the white store owners were not so interested in or so friendly to black persons who attempted to shop in Newark. If that were the case, did black folk continue to patronize those stores --

Banks: Oh yeah.

Q: -- or did they go elsewhere?

Banks: Well, they didn't have too much of a choice. But see Springfield Avenue and parts of South Orange Avenue used to be loaded with stores. It was almost like downtown. And they would sell on credit. And a lot of people didn't even go downtown. They went to those stores where they could get credit. Downtown, they weren't particular about your coming down there.

Q: What do you consider to have been the best stores in Newark?

Banks: You mean for the blacks?

Q: For Newark period. What were the better stores?

Banks: Bambergers, Kresges, Hanes. They were the top stores.

Q: And all of them discriminated against blacks?

Banks: Yes.

Q: Do you recall any specific racial incidents or racial discrimination aside from the stores in Newark?

Banks: The schools. Schools, certain schools didn't want black in them. Like Eastside, [?]. The Jews ran [?]. Eastside Italians ran. Barrigan, they didn't want blacks in Barrigan. But some of them lived in that area and they didn't have any choice. What they wanted to do was send all the blacks to Southside and to Central High. Even though each school had a sprinkling of blacks in it,

the heavily concentrated Central High and Southside.

Q: I see. What about Westside High School?

Banks: They wasn't too happy about us being in there either. I went to Westside, and we didn't have that many blacks up there when I went.

Q: What do you remember abut the quote, unquote Mayor of Springfield Avenue? Did you ever hear that, that?

Banks: I've heard that phrase but I never know what they meant or who they meant.

Q: Okay. What do you remember regarding such local personalities as William Ashby, Meyer Ellingstone, who was Newark's first Jewish mayor, Prosper Brewer who was supposed to be Newark's first black policeman, and Irving Turner, Newark's first black elected official? You recall any of those folk?

Banks: Yeah, I recall all of them.

Q: What do you recall about Mr. Ashby?

Banks: Well, he was an activist. He was before his time. He became an activist before activists became popular. He was very outspoken.

Q: Do you know what was his specific contribution to the black community?

Banks: That I don't know.

Q: What was Newark like under Meyer Ellingstone as mayor?

Banks: I was a little bit too young then. Don't know.

Q: And I believe you spoke about Irving Turner. But after Irving was elected as the first black city councilperson, how did he relate to the black community?

Banks: Well, he had all good intentions, but he didn't have support. Our people have a bad habit of getting our people into certain positions and then when they get them here they don't back em up as they should.

Q: Right.

Banks: And to my mind, he never received the backing of the black community like he should have. So he saw a hard time as a councilman.

Q: You say he saw a hard time. In what ways? Can you recall any specifics?

Banks: Well, like when he was trying to get things for the ward, for that area, they wouldn't go to City Hall and support him. He had to almost fight the battles by himself. He didn't get the. They voted him in there and just left him hanging there.

Q: Do you suppose he was elected primarily by the black vote?

Banks: Oh yes. Definitely.

Q: What do you remember regarding black institutions such as hospitals, hotels and banks in Newark?

Banks: Well. None of them, even the schools. When I went to school, didn't have any black teachers. Hotels, you were the chambermaid, the janitor, and clean-up person. And the banks. My father was the first black man to work in a bank that handled money. And that's cause they thought he was white. The way they found out he wasn't white was we were riding down the highway going to Belmar and this white lady in the car next to us kept looking over at us and trying to get his attention. So my stepmother was sitting in the front seat with him and she thumbed her nose at the woman and stuck her tongue out at her. Cause she kept looking. So when he got to work, I don't remember when it was when he got to work, this lady said to him she saw him on the highway and he had a car full of niggers with him. And said that nigger that was sitting in the front stuck her tongue out at me. And he said, oh, you mean my wife. And she couldn't wait to go tell the boss that he had a black wife. Then he told them that he was black too.

Q: She had thought he was white all the time.

Banks: All the time they thought he was white. Everybody on that job. And they asked him why didn't he tell them. Why was he trying to hide the fact that he was black? He said, I didn't hide nothing. You never asked me what I was. But he had such a position of trust and everything and had such a good record that they couldn't get rid of him, or they didn't get rid of him. Then we had two ladies, one lady I new personally from Bethany who worked at the City Hospital. Now the City Hospital didn't have black nurses. But she worked there for years until they found out she was black. And after they found out she was black, it was too late then cause she had seniority and everything and longevity.

Q: What about black ownership of those institutions? Were there any black owned or operated hospitals or hotels?

Banks: No. Oh yeah, one hotel, one, no, one hospital. What was the name of that hospital? It was on West Kenny Street near Hyde Street. And his son was my scout master. It was called the

Community Hospital. It was on West Kenny Street near Hyde Street. And it was owned and run by blacks.

Q: What about hotels and banks? Were there any?

Banks: No banks. But there was a couple of little small hotels. On West Market Street, the hotel there where. You heard of the Newark Bears.

Q: Baseball team.

Banks: Black baseball team. Well, that was their headquarters. And Mrs .Manley was the owner of that team. And they, when they were in Newark or around Newark, they made their home at their hotel. It's on West Market Street.

Q: Wasn't there a Coleman Hotel located down town on Central Ward someplace?

Banks: The Coleman Hotel was on Court Street. And that was another small hotel. That's about the only two black owned hotels.

Q: How important were these institutions to the black community?

Banks: Well, unfortunately they were the hotels that you went for a couple of hours, rent for a couple hours.

Q: Well, I mean as far as the hospitals. Any --

Banks: Now the hospital was nice. But our folks didn't patronize it like they should have. But like as I said, the hotels was transient.

Q: And were you ever served by any of those institutions? The hospital or the hotel or?

Banks: [Laughter] Now wait a minute now. No, I never did. I had a home. I didn't have to go to the hotel.

Q: I'm speaking for me.

Banks: I didn't go to the Community Hospital for anything, no.

Q: Business prospective or need, Mr. Banks.

Banks: Or patron, huh.

Q: All right. We'll leave that.

Banks: Please.

Q: Do you remember any of the individuals who were associated with the black hospital and the black hotel? We talked about the Coleman Brothers owning a hotel, and another one that you mentioned. And.

Banks: Yeah. Their hotel. That was on West Market Street.

Q: Okay. Do you remember any of the persons who were associated with the ownership or with the running of those institutions?

Banks: Well, I knew a couple of the Coleman Brothers because they were a quartet. Had, you know, they had a quartet in their family called the Coleman Brothers. And I knew a couple of

them. And the owner down at the Grand Hotel, I knew him because he was a good friend of Mr. Churchman. I met him through Mr. Churchman. Now, the owner of the hospital. I knew his name just as well. He and my father were close friends. I cannot think. I cannot think of his name right now. But he started the hotel and his son came. Not the hotel, the hospital, Community Hospital. And his son tried to pick up when he came out of medical school, but they weren't getting any support.

Q: What do you remember regarding the kinds of the music that was heard in black Newark such as. Do you remember seeing any black musicians who came to the City?

Banks: Oh yeah. Lot of people, old Adams Theater. All the big bands came through there. Lionel Hampton, Jimmy Lundsford. I'm talking about black bands now. All the white bands came through here too. But Jimmy Lundsford and Duke Ellington and Earl Heinz. All those kinds of bands, they came through.

Q: What kind of music did they play as a rule?

Banks: Blues, swing.

Q: What about gospel singers? Were there any gospel groups who came to the city?

Banks: Not to that hotel, I mean, not to that theater. The gospel singers usually showed up at the churches. Once in a while they'd have a gospel jubilee down at the Symphony Hall. They'd had a gospel get together. But most of the time, the gospel groups appeared at the churches. Like the Martin singers, five blind boys from wherever.

Q: Alabama.

Banks: Well, you got five blind boys from every place in the south. [Laughter] One time I thought half the south was blind. They had so many blind boys from somewhere. And Metropolitan. Now Bethany didn't cater too much to them, to the gospel groups, quartets, you know. But Metropolitan, New Hope. It was a big.

Q: In what leisure time activities did you participate as you grew up, Mr. Banks. Such as perhaps playing sports or going to the movies. Did you ever do any gardening, etc., storytelling, working with young people?

Banks: Yeah. I was a Sunday School teacher all the time. I used to entertain the young kids. Those that was younger than I was. I participated in sports in high school. And at the Y I played basketball and we had dances at the Y. And also clubs, like the Y, like what they call the RY and the High Y. The High Y was for high school students.

Q: What was the RY? What did that mean?

Banks: Well, actually it's for high school students too, but it was a different area of town. But they got together at the Y. In other words, it's two different people started the two different groups.

Q: You mentioned the Newark Eagles a little while ago. Did you ever attend any of their games?

Banks: Oh yeah. When they were in town, I tried to see them almost every time.

Q: Were there any other black athletic sports events that you attended?

Banks: No all black, no.

Q: What do you recall regarding theseamyy side of black Newark like?

Banks: Well, that was considered on the hill. Spruce Street. That's where all the prostitutes and pimps. Most of them hung out in that area. Waverly Avenue and Spring Street. And the pool parlors were over then. At that time, pool parlor was considered downgrading yourself.

Q: It was considered what?

Banks: You're downgrading yourself if you went to a pool parlor.

Q: Oh I see.

Banks: I mean West Market was a pretty active street too.

Q: Do you recall any black gangsters in Newark?

Banks: No. They was poor excuses for gangsters. They tried to be, but they were poor excuses.

Q: What activities did those poor excuses for gangsters involve themselves in?

Banks: Stealing, hold-ups and things like that. You never heard too muchaboutu that.

Q: Do you think any of those people who participated in the quote, unquote *seamy* side of life, did they make any positive contributions to the black life in Newark?

Banks: Well, I'll tell you. We didn't hear too much from them. I didn't. I imagine they must have had some kind of, you know, effect on the life of.

Q: How were they perceived by people who did not live in the area, but perhaps people who did not follow their trade? In other words, how did the general community perceive them?

Banks: Well, they'd talk about em in church. I mean, one reason I guess I didn't know about them too much because I wasn't allowed in that area til I got, you know, old enough to go over there.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

Banks: Talking about the seamy side, I didn't see to much oofit or hear too much about.

Q: I think the last question I asked was how did the black community in general, what did the black community in general think about those people and their very existence as far as that's concerned?

Banks: Oh well, you know there's always a group of people that's down on people who do things like that.

Q: Who are different from themselves.

Banks: Yeah. Talked about them in the churches, and the ppoliticianstalked about they're gonna get rid of em and make meaningful citizens out of them. That was their talk so they could get elected. But.

Q: What do you remember about public education in Newark, and what was the quality of education like as you went through the school system as compared to what it is now? And how well did black students seem to perform academically?

Banks: Well, I'd say there's no comparison in the school systems from yesterday and today. When

I went to school, people used to bring their children down from Livingston, bring them down from [?] to be enrolled in the Newark school system because they had such an excellent school system. Only hard part about it that they discouraged blacks from take college preparatory courses. They only encouraged them to take what they called civic course which is not preparing you for anything in specific. And they would encourage the girls to take secretarial course. And for preparing yourself for college, they didn't believe a black man should go to college. So they used to advise you against going to college. They would put all kind of obstacles in your way to keep you from being prepared to go to college.

Q: Were there any black teachers in the system that you recall?

Banks: Not when I was in school, no. The black teachers didn't come until after the War.

Q: How were black students treated by the white teachers and by white students in the school?

Banks: Well, there usually was just a sprinkling of blacks in each school. I never went to a school like in the Third Ward, what is that ward, Central Ward, where it is was predominantly black. I never went to a school like that. Two schools I went to Robert Treet and to West Side was three-quarters or nine-tenths white. And like I said, they would try to discourage you, you know, preparing yourself for anything in the future. They wanted boys to go to vocational schools when they got out of junior high school, and they wanted the girls to go to secretarial school down at Central High School. But as for preparing for college, they'd tell you you're wasting your time. You have no future in going to college.

Q: Were black students involved in intramural sports or extracurricular activities at school?

Banks: Yeah. If you were in sports, you had a better chance of getting along. The idea being blacks were better in sports than the whites anyway as a rule.

Q: Do you recall any specific black teacher in your school?

Banks: There wasn't any.

Q: None.

Banks: None.

Q: What would you consider, Mr. Banks, to be the five most important events or developments that have occurred in Newark during your residency, for instance, like labor strikes or political elections, the riot of '67, any major fires or natural disasters such as wind storms or tornadoes or snow storms, etc.? Could you think of five such incidents that happened over the years?

Banks: Well, you named the major one in the riots. I don't know whether it was because I was small or, but the snows in those days seemed like they were much greater than the snows we have now. Because I can remember walking all the way to school on top of snow banks, but I haven't seen anything like that but once or twice since I've been an adult. And we had problems of [?], so you could forget [?] because we weren't even allowed in [?] Park. But we had many riots and many fights in the Branson's Park because they didn't want us in Branson Park. And like when we had a football game up at the stadium, a lot of us would come down Bloomfield Avenue and cut through Branson Park to get over to Orange Street and West Market Street, where most of us lived, and many a day we had to fight our way through the park just to get home.

Q: In what major ways has Newark changed since since you have been living here, and how do you view the changes that have occurred?

Banks: Well, ninety-five percent white, it's changed to ninety-five percent black. The conditions -

Q: The percentage of black is not, it's not ninety-five percent black.

Banks: It's pretty close.

Q: No, it's possibly maybe fifty, forty, not fifty, about sixty, forty.

Banks: Keep going.

Q: No, no, no. It's probably about sixty, forty now.

Banks: Yeah. Cause I know the table changed completed from what it was. When I came along, the whites were predominant. Now the blacks are dominant no matter where you go. No more minorities in the blacks.

Q: When you say minorities in the blacks, what do you mean?

Banks: Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Blacks. Of course, now, when I went to school, you hardly saw a Puerto Rican if you saw any, or Jamaican. Black, there was just hardly any of them here.

Q: Now they're saying that the demographics have changed over the years. How did that affect the quality of life in Newark in general? What about economics and the social life in Newark and the quality of education and all of those things? How have they changed in your view over those years as the demographics changed?

Banks: They're getting worse and worse. Instead of getting better, they're getting worse.

Q: Why do you think that is?

Banks: Well, let's look at it. When I was a kid, even though you couldn't go into a lot of places that would keep you out, you still had places that you could go. When I was coming along as a, in my twenties and early thirties, there were some nice clubs in Newark that you could go to for nice entertainment. Now there's no place that you can go in Newark, a decent club, and have decent entertainment. If you want to see any kind of entertainment, you've either got to New York and Atlantic City. The educational system is terrible. The kids aren't learning anything. You go into a school the kids are walking around with braids in their hair, hats on their head, pants falling off. And they don't respect anybody. And it seems to me they're not even being taught respect. The teachers, you go into a school, especially if you go into a high school, you don't know who the teacher is and who the student is. Because the teachers dress just as badly as the students. And they give the students nothing to work for. And instead of bringing the students up to their level, they're dropping down to the student's level just to be one of them. And they're not learning anything. There's a very few that's learning anything.

Q: What about the quality of life for the average resident in Newark, whether they're white or black or other?

Banks: When you say quality of life, in what way are you talking about?

Q: The economic, their economic status and their ability to maintain themselves as families. Income levels of people who live in Newark now. Do you think the demographic changes have had any, either negative or positive, impact on the quality of life?

Banks: Well, the economic level is higher than when we came along, when I came along. But the respect and the feeling of community is completely gone. The family life has completely disintegrated in most cases. And sometimes, we were much better off poor in those days than these people are that's got good jobs and got money flowing throughout the community, and most of their money is coming in from dope, from the wrong sources. From dope and narcotics, all

those different kinds. And the people have no value of life. It's just breakdown in the community is almost complete because they have no respect or any feeling for their community.

Q: What kind of, let's say, traditions that were primarily of interest to black folk, celebrations or various events that black folk might have celebrated in Newark as you grew up and they no longer exist? Can you think of any traditions or celebrations or events that, like I said, were primarily of interest to black folks that no longer exist here?

Banks: Well, we used to celebrate Booker T. Washington's birthday. We used to celebrate [?] Miller's day, the one that got killed in World War II, the first black. We used to, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Fourth of July, holidays like that, the family used to make it a habit of trying to get together on those days. Today the family doesn't do anything hardly together. Very seldom they do. They don't even eat together.

Q: I remember from there used to a Christmas Attics Parade.

Banks: Christmas Attics Parade, right.

Q: In Newark. Did that turn or change into the Black Heritage Parade or?

Banks: Yeah.

Q: Or did it just stop?

Banks: Well, Christmas Attics stopped and they got this Black Heritage things now.

Q: I see. How did you feel about the disappearance of those? When you talk about the fact that families used to get together, they don't do that any more and the Christmas Attics Day Parade no

longer being there, and those birthdays of blacks that we used to celebrate, how did you feel about those things disappearing? Do you think that they changed the attitude of blacks toward each other, or the respect that blacks may have had for those kinds of things then? How do you think that affected the black community?

Banks: By ceasing to have these things, it kind of took the glue that held the community together away. Because when they had these things, they would come together at these particular times. But now they have nothing to really come together for. Now Black Heritage is all right in its place, but all of us didn't come from Africa. Cause my father was American Indian, you know. All of us, they say they got black heritage, yeah, but maybe they came from other places. There's black Asians, you know, back in the old days. And Nubians, where did they come from? They didn't come from Africa.

Q: Mr. Banks, how do you feel about the disappearance of those black traditions that you talked about?

Banks: I feel like that was what was holding us together and that bonded us together. The different things that we used to celebrate. When we stopped celebrating, we lost the bond that had bound us.

Q: When do you feel black life in Newark reached its highest peak, and what was so great about that particular time?

Banks: Well, in my day I would say the peak came just before we went into the War. No, I guess it was just after the War was over and we started, we had the advantage of the GI Bill of Rights, which helped many of us go to school and get an education that we probably wouldn't have been able to get under other circumstances.

Q: What else would you consider as having been good about that time when black life was at its peak in Newark? Other than being able to get education, was there something else that might have made that time better than it was before or better than it has been since?

Banks: Well, we were a closer knit group of people at that time. And we socialized together more. Our churches worked together more and expanded their teachings more. We had places in Newark that we could go to and relax and enjoy ourselves, which we don't have now. We weren't rich but we were happy.

Q: When do you feel black life in Newark reached its lowest point, and what was so bad about that particular time?

Banks: I think it's at its lowest point right now.

Q: Why so?

Banks: Well, our churches are not getting the support that they should get. Our schools are not teaching the youngsters as they should be teaching. The housing, they're making an effort to build new houses and they are doing a good job. They are building new housing. But they're not educating the people before they put em in these new houses.

Q: What impact do you think that mis-educating or not educating young blacks and the fact that people are not taught how or advised on how to live in new housing so that the housing stock remains viable? What do you think is missing there?

Banks: Education. They have just about given up on the young black male of today. If you look around you, the majority of blacks in college are female. The males are standing on the street corners selling dope and getting over that way. The schools are putting what they call troublesome

children out of school. And when they put them out of school, that just put a strain on what's going on in the streets. In other words, it's a forgotten age that we're going through now for the young people. We're not helping the young people. They're abandoning them. Because they say they're incorrigible and can't be taught. But I think that anybody, if taken the time, can be taught.

Q: What do you remember about Louise Scott? Did you know her?

Banks: Yes. I met her on a few occasions. And she was a very personable person. She had a very nice business going down at Scott's Manor. And the school that she was head of was doing nicely for a while. And I believe she was involved in fashions as well. Because Emily Miles was working with her for a long time, and Emily Miles is known for her fashion and her hats. And they looked like they were successful there for a long time.

Q: What do you think the community's perception of Mrs. Scott was?

Banks: I think they looked up to her and respected her for the way she took some of the young girls and make beauticians out of them and taught them things. She was a positive person in the community.

Q: Did you ever go to her home on High Street?

Banks: No.

Q: What do you know about the High Street area where the Krueger Scott Mansion is located?

Banks: Well, across the street from the. Let me see, was that, Krueger's auditorium was down the street from there. And they had many social events and many concerts in Krueger's manor and Krueger's auditorium. So and then the Fourth Street Y was right around the corner from them. It

was a gathering point for the young people at one time.

Q: What about the homes that were on High Street in that same area before the neighborhood began to change?

Banks: Some of our richest people living there, not black people, but some of the richest people in Newark and the Newark area were living on High Street. And they had these mansions on High Street. And they employed quite a few of our people there.

Q: Did you know any of the persons who ever worked for any of those families?

Banks: Yes. I knew a few butlers. I knew a cook. In fact, two of the butlers and one of the cooks attended Bethany that worked on High Street. They worked for Kruegers in fact.

Q: Did you know who owned the mansion before? Was there an owner between the Kruegers and Miss Scott of the Scott Mansion or Scott Manor?

Banks: Yes. I can't think of who it was now though. But I knew there was a time in between the Krueger and the Scott that there was somebody else trying to take over there. Then Miss Scott bought it.

Q: How would you sum up your experience of living in Newark?

Banks: It was an experience. What can I say? It was an experience Cause I went through everything in the City of Newark. I went through segregation, I went through education. I participated in sports and knew certain areas of the City that did not want me there. And were certain areas of the City that was considered belonged to one race and not the other. But I will say that the education that I received in Newark was top notch. And the teachers were, even though

they were prejudiced, they did teach.

Q: If you had your life to live over, would you live in Newark?

Banks: Not at this day and time if I could help it.

Q: Why?

Banks: Well, it's like we've been talking. Education has deteriorated, neighborhoods have deteriorated, family life has deteriorated. And churches are having problems. The respect for the churches are not there that used to be there.

Q: Well, Mr. Banks, is there anything that we did not cover, anything that is significant to you that I didn't ask you about that you'd like to talk about?

Banks: No. I think we've covered just about everything. After you leave, I'll think of a hundred things that we should have talked about. But we covered most everything.

Q: That's usually the way it is. I wish I had this. I wish I had said that.

Banks: Yeah.

Q: Well, that's the end of our interview. And let me just express my gratitude to you for having let me come even though you kept me waiting for forty-five minutes.

Banks: [Laughter] It wasn't forty-five minutes. My goodness.

Q: Again, thanks Mr. Banks and it really has been a pleasure.

Banks: Okay. Come again sometime and I'll have more answers for you.

END OF SESSION